



Army Transforming America

Exploring America's Frontiers

AFTER purchasing the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson predicted American settlement of these vast, unexplored western lands would take centuries. Yet before the 1800s had run their course, the West would be surveyed, mapped and settled for inclusion as states of the federal union. The Army played an indispensable role in this unprecedented development.

Jefferson dispatched Army CPTs Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their “Corps of Discovery” to find the source of the Missouri River in the lands of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory, and to lay claim to territory on the Pacific coast. The two-year journey combined scientific and geographic discovery with commercial and political considerations. Sending soldiers was a natural choice, because they were able and available. And they could display and assert federal authority in ways civilians could not.

Lewis and Clark gathered and recorded data on terrain, climate, vegetation and animal life. As one historian wrote: “By crossing the uncharted wilderness and returning with detailed and accurate accounts of what they found there, they transformed an unknown and forbidding land into an objective of desire, an area of great potential value with unlimited opportunities for anyone enterprising and daring enough to take advantage of them.”

Army explorers and engineers, both well known and nearly forgotten, continued the work Lewis and Clark had begun. Pathfinder LT John C. Fremont surveyed the Oregon Trail and wrote colorful and enthusiastic reports and practical advice for travelers who made the trek west. CPT Randolph Marcy escorted early wagon trains into New Mexico and explored western rivers, and CPT George Wheeler mapped large portions of the West from Texas to Central Washington. In the 1850s, 1LT Amiel Whipple directed the survey for a future transcontinental railroad from Fort Smith, Ark., to Los Angeles, Calif., while other soldiers completed the surveys needed to fix America's boundaries with Canada and Mexico and the borders between the states that grew from these newly explored lands. No doubt Jefferson would be astonished by what soldiers wrought in his Louisiana Territory. — *CPT Patrick Swan*